Sir, I am glad to inform the hon. Members that so far, no State Government has opposed this scheme.

PROF. M. SANKARALINGAM: Sir, the Central Government has sent a proposal to the State Governments to reduce the rate of stamp duty to 5 per cent so that more and more people get their documents registered. In Tamil Nadu, the rate of stamp duty is 12 per cent; whereas in Kerala it is 6 per cent. So the people of Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu go to the Tamil Nadu-Kerala border to get their documents registered because in Kerala they have to pay only 6 per cent stamp duty. What are the steps that Central Government taking to see to it that the rate of stamp duty is not more than five per cent in all the States?

SHRI O. RAJAGOPAL: Sir, as I mentioned earlier, this matter comes under the purview of the State Government. The Central Government cannot direct the State Governments to levy a particular rate of stamp duty. We are trying to persuade the State Governments that it should not be more than 5 per cent. It is our objective. In fact, it is the right of the State Governments which we do not want to impinge upon.

Sethusamudram Canal Project

*264. SHRI SANTOSH BAGRODIA:††

DR. T. SUBBARAMI REDDY:

Will the Minister of SHIPPING be pleased to state:

(a) whether work on the Sethusamudram Canal Project with an initial investment of Rs. 200 to Rs. 230 crore will begin soon;

(b) whether the report of the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), Which is conducting techno-economic and environmental impact assessment studies for the project, has been received by Government;

(c) whether the project was initially proposed in 1860 and three feasibility studies have been conducted in 1955, 1983 and 1996 for the project besides a detailed feasibility study conducted by NEERI, Nagpur; and

(d) if so, by when this project is likely to start?

††The question was actually asked on the floor of the House by Shri Santosh Bagrodia.

THE MINISTER OF SHIPPING (SHRI VED PRAKASH GOYAL): (a) and (d) National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) has been entrusted the task of conducting Techno-economic viability and Comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessment studies for Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project. The study reports by NEERI are expected by May, 2003. Decision about the actual time of start and amount of investment required on this project can only be taken after these reports are received.

(b) No, Sir.

(c) A number of proposals were formulated and several Committees were set up since 1860, including the proposal and studies mentioned in the question.

SHRI SANTOSH BAGRODIA: Sir, this project was proposed in 1860, *i.e.* 142 years ago. The studies were conducted in 1955, 1983 and 1996. How much money has been spent on making these studies? What is the outcome of these studies? We are going to get another report which is in process. How much would this report cost us? Is the Government serious about this project?

SHRI VED PRAKASH GOYAL: Sir, the Government is very serious about this project. As the hon. Member has mentioned, this proposal was mooted in 1860 and the study reports came in 1955, 1983 and 1996. The Government of Tamil Nadu got the final report in 1996. Actually, the study report was taken up seriously after 1991 when the Coastal Regulation Zone was established and when the study of environment became more serious. After that it was taken up in 1998. The National Environmental Engineering Research Institute, NEERI was asked to carry out environmental impact assessment studies. They submitted the report in 1998. During those days, these studies were not very costly. The costliest report came in 1999. On 15th September 1998, the hon. Prime Minister gave an assurance in Chennai that this project would be implemented. In December, a Committee of the PIB proposed to conduct a final study to take care of the environmental concerns. I feel Rs. 4.2 crores for the report was high, as the cost of report has gone up and the environmental study has to be done over several seasons. This was to take two years. Later on, when we took over, I felt that two years period is too long. So, another report within a reasonable period of time will be viable. Then, we

called all these agencies, which are in India, very specialised and very well-equipped, all of them together and gave NEERI one year's time and the next report is expected in May, 2003. After that only, further work can be done and this time the report will be costing only Rs. 1 crore.

SHRI SANTOSH BAGRODIA: Sir, my second supplementary is, whether in any of these reports, have they suggested that the depth of this canal should be 9 metres and not 7 metres? If so, what is the saving expected in shipping sector after completion of the project? Will the Government send this record of getting reports prepared on this project in 150 years to the Guinese Book of World Records?

SHRI VED PRAKASH GOYAL: I can give to the hon. Member the gist of all the reports that have been received since 1860. He will have to patiently go through them. Now, all the reports have been on 10 metre depth and 10 metre depth in those days was recommended at nearly Rs. 200 crores. Today, that depth is estimated at about Rs. 750 crores, over so many years. Now, we have planned that the first part of the project will be started only with 7 metre depth, although that is not ideal, but some boats of smaller size can start and the canal can become navigational, which has not been used for all these years, for more than 100 years. Now, our plan is to go ahead at a smaller rate of 7 metres, which will cost about Rs. 200 crores or someting. Every metre you go down, the cost goes on increasing tremendously. That is, we want to make a start and then go over to 10 metre depth as dredging can continue, while the navigation is going on.

DR. T. SUBBARAMI REDDY: Mr. Chairman, Sir, on October 23, the hon. Minister of State in the Ministry of Shipping, Mr. Thirunavukkarasar, in his review meeting clearly mentioned that this project is very important and they are going to start within a few months. In that review meeting, he also announced that in the beginning of 2003, he is going to spend Rs. 250 crores. He has committed and he has also mentioned that his project is very important and it is going to increase the trade and also help in saving foreign exchange for the country. Surprisingly, the Minister has stated in his written reply that by May, 2003, the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute would submit study reports. Why is such a red-tapism going on? The Minister of State commits in the review meeting that they are going to take up the project from the beginning of the year.

Now, the reply comes that in May, 2003, they are expecting a reply from the NEERI, Then also, जब सोचेंगे तब करेंगे। They are not in a position to give a clear-cut answer.

MR. CHAIRMAN: This is enough for a clear-cut answer.

DR. T. SUBBARAMI REDDY: It is a 150 years old project, sir.

श्री संघ प्रिय गौतम: डेढ़ सौ साल से चल रहा है। 860 से।

DR. T. SUBBARAMI REDDY: When are you going to complete it? The Minister should give an assurance to the House.

SHRI VED PRAKASH GOYAL: When the hon. Minister of State in the Ministry of Shipping stated that it will take some months, I maintain that statement that it will take some months and what I have given here is March. As you know, these type of studies cannot be mathematically determined. We have estimated now that it may go up to May and all other costs can be estimated only after that and the time can be estimated only after that and also Rs. 200 crore, the approximate amount, which we will fund.

SHRI S. VIDUTHALAI VIRUMBI: Mr. Chairman, Sir, from the reply given by the hon. Minister, it is quite clear that this project has been found economically viable and technically feasible. Sir, out of 12 major ports in India, not all the ports are up to the international standard. That is the major issue. And Sir, we only have feeding vessels; It is only the container vessels of Singapore and Colombo which are taking our goods. Only 30 per cent of our goods exported are using the Indian vessels. That is the position today. Therefore, in the national interest, I am raising this point. I feel, we should have a port of international standard. I would like to know whether the hon. Minister would give an assurance...

MR. CHAIRMAN: This doesn't look like a supplementary; it is a different question itself.

SHRI S. VIDUTHALAI VIRUMBI: Sir, when the Minister is talking about the monetary part, he mentioned that it would cost around Rs. 750 crores. Whether it is Rs. 750 crores of Rs. 1,000 crores, or even if it is going to cost Rs. 2,000 crores, would the Government agree to consider such a proposal?

SHRI VED PRAKASH GOYAL: Sir, this sort of a hypothetical question, whether the Government would agree to a cost of Rs. 2,000 crores or not, cannot obviously be answered. The second part of his supplementary relates, in fact, to transhipment movement. That cannot be done through this canal. and, to have a depth of the canal, say more than 10 metres will not be adequate here. Moreover, Sir, it is a separate question; it does not relate to the main question...(*Interruptions*) The technical feasibility has never been questioned; the economic feasibility has never been questioned. It is only the environmental aspect which was questioned.

SHRI P. G. NARAYANAN: Mr. Chairman, Sir, it is a long pending scheme and a very important one. I feel that the Government is going too slow on the scheme. Considering the importance of the scheme, can the Government come forward and complete this project at the earliest? Can the Government also fix a time frame for this and give an assurance that this project would be finished within a short time, because it is a very important scheme.

श्री सभापति: मंत्री जी के उत्तर से स्पष्ट है कि इसका कोई टाइमफ्रेम नहीं होगा। इसलिए उनकी तरफ से वही जवाब आयेगा।

Purchase of Tobacco

*265. SHRI K. RAHMAN KHAN: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) the quantity of tobacco purchased from tobacco farmers through Tbobacco Board since 1998-99, year-wise and State-wise;

(b) whether Government are aware that Tobacco Board is acting in a partisan manner with regard to purchase of tobacco from Karnataka farmers;

(c) whether it is a fact that Government of Karnataka has requested Government to purchase the tobacco on the basis of production capacity of the States; and

(d) if so, the details of the action taken in this regard?